

# India: Imperialism's Steel and Glass Facade

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*Chennai, Southern India. The overpowering stench of tradition blends. Thin, young women wrapped tightly in saris disappear into the alleyways. Black burqa-clad figures drift through the dusty twilight. Powerfully built matriarchs chatter in doorways, and grizzly bare-chested old men in lunghis sit on steps, counting down the days.*

Shiva, Ganesh, Vishnu, Nandi, Krishna and a dozen other Hindu icons peer out from the various temples and shrines that watch over the neighbourhood. It's hot on the street and almost furnace-like in the tiny, concrete hutments with vegetation rooftops in the next lane.

Streets give way to a maze of narrow alleyways. Around each corner, a new story, a new scene; neighbourhoods within neighbourhoods, glued together by extended families.

Street after narrow street of three to five-storey small buildings, each with their own architectural style. Distinctive buildings, brightly painted with small balconies, intricate alcoves and verandas. A number of families residing in one building, or just a single family, depending how well-off the occupants are. Some old and crumbling, others more modern. Lean over one balcony and you could almost touch the one opposite, so narrow are some of the lanes.

The most fascinating aspect of these Chennai neighbourhoods is the businesses operating at street level. Men repair mopeds and motorcycles. Others operate lathes, mill or bake. Printing presses run, wood is cut, garments are ironed. Photocopying and desktop publishing, metal pipes and plastic tubing or family shops selling food. A dabha here, a rice trader, jeweller and a tailor there, every street a hive of business activity. The buildings and some of the trades may now be modern, but artisans and vendors have worked in these streets for decades.

Some of these neighbourhoods may not be too gentle on the eye at times, but they play host to India's genuine 'creative industries' and spirit of endeavour. Those terms have, however, been hijacked by the 'new' India of steel and glass, where ad agencies, tech-savvy college graduates, architects, marketers and designers ply their trades. What do these people actually 'create' though - mobile 'apps', social media technology, slick propaganda to promote goods and gadgets of dubious worth and fashions and trends for the better-off. This is corporate India, usually added on to the outskirts of cities as soulless 'new build' developments, an India that is big on self-promoting itself as the innovative engine.

## **Imperialism's steel and glass facade**

I recently met a medical doctor from the Netherlands who was on vacation in India and who spent much of his time in shopping malls located in the new satellite town developments that have sprung up around India's metros. It was his first brief visit to the country. He

seemed fascinated by this corporate India and the open attitudes of the 20-somethings he encountered and found them a refreshing change from the more traditional India. Not only was he fascinated by what he was finding, but he was also under the impression that such types represented India's future. For him, they were India's entrepreneurs and innovators.

It's easy to be seduced by the world of the English speaking, fashion-conscious 'switched on' people who you tend to encounter in the AC, steel and glass worlds of Gurgaon near Delhi or Salt Lake near Kolkata, for instance. For many foreign visitors, this world is a mirror image of 'home,' a showcase of how India should be; a world of outsourced service sector jobs, international brands and concentrated affluence based on a distorted notion of 'development.'

What too often goes unacknowledged, however, is the recognition that this is a world that represents the willingness of the nation's powerholders to acquiesce to (and personally profit from) the motives of the Western corporations that depressed wages at home over a period of decades in order to appropriate more wealth and then, faced with consequent falling profits as the debt bubble created to sustain demand burst, turned to places like India to seek even more profits via even cheaper labour and controlling resources and markets.

One sector that has oiled this process and witnessed huge growth in India over the last 20 years has been the advertising industry. Its end-products are slick, glossy and highly persuasive. But there's not much 'innovation' or 'creativity' here - just a cut-and-borrow industry that uses the same techniques its western counterpart has been using for years, adapted to the needs of an Indian audience and used to create new markets, demands and false needs.

But let's not be too harsh on the ad industry. Whether it's an outsourced call centre, a western agribusiness armed with its pesticide-responsive seeds or a social media development concern, any innovation or creativity, if that's what it can be called, is too often merely used to make predatory capitalism slicker, more appealing and more controlling. The more sophisticated and powerful technology becomes, the greater is the danger that it is used to enslave people. Look no further than the lakhs of farmers who have been thrown into poverty or who have taken their own lives as a result of the desire of western agribusiness to control the food supply in India via its political connections and bogus campaigns of how its brand of 'innovative' biotechnology can save the country from itself.

Yet, so many people have bought into the notion of these 'creative industries' being the saviour of the nation. There tends to be more purposeful and socially useful entrepreneurialism in a back lane in Bangalore than what goes on in a gleaming Mumbai skyscraper.

### **True wealth of every nation**

There is more true creativity in the fields of India, where rural workers are the genuine wealth creators. What greater wealth can there be than the creation of locally sourced, un-tampered and nutritious food? Food and food sovereignty marks the real wealth of a nation, not social media 'apps', the ability to sell use-and-throw goods via trendy advertising agencies or to mount PR campaigns to con the public into believing 'West knows best.'

Unfortunately, you don't have to dig too deep to ascertain where 'modern' India's priorities

lie. While the creamy layer of the service sector/'creative industries' is paid well by its corporate masters, it is the actual wealth creators, the farm labourers and many of the back street entrepreneurs who live in poverty or hover above it.

Given current trends, things could soon get much worse. Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Prakash Karat recently said the government was undertaking measures to appease foreign finance capital and big businesses on the one hand and burden people with price rise and reduced subsidies on the other. In particular, the decision to allow foreign direct investment in multi-brand retail, disinvestments in profitable public sector enterprises, efforts to increase foreign direct investment in the insurance sector and privatise funds are all meant to profit foreign capital and corporations.

Whether it is in the form of slick media propaganda, is instituted by law through the pen or takes place via military oppression through the barrel of a gun, today in India looting and violence take many forms.

In the meantime, the self-congratulatory beneficiaries of this predatory capitalism, both in India and across the world, lie back and wallow in their stolen wealth. While in public, they and their media like to mouth platitudes about the virtues of globalisation, behind closed doors in the boardrooms, policy-driving think tanks and corridors of power, the words are somewhat different. There, it's a case of "Let them (the masses) eat cake." In India's case, not necessarily cake, but poor quality government subsidised rice.

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